

Sustainable Growth and Planning

[Ryan Walker]

Our demographic profile makes us one of the youngest cities in Canada. We also have a rising older adult population, which means our city should develop in ways that are age-friendly. First Nations and Métis peoples are central to Saskatoon's future, present, and past. Our city continues to diversify culturally. A high quality of urban life that is financially sustainable over the long-term is important. Addressing income inequality and the factors that create social exclusion is a challenge that we will need to keep focusing our best efforts on as a civic community. Today I will highlight *5 key issues* to focus on in the short-term and over the next 20 years. Saskatoon has a framework for growth and transportation in place already and leadership from City Hall can result in the *implementation* of some critical development strategies that help us grow sustainably.

1. Inward growth

Saskatoon is a low density city overall. To provide a higher quality of service and the most vibrant neighbourhoods we can, in a financially responsible way, we need to prioritize growing inward, rather than outward. This is the best way to grow our tax base, and minimize our infrastructure costs over the entire asset life-cycle, while improving our overall urban environment. Costly infrastructure will be used more efficiently, reducing costs per household and business for operations, maintenance, rehabilitation and replacement (e.g., paving and repairing our streets, snow removal, water and sewer lines, libraries, fire and police services, recreation facilities, transit service, parks, among other things). Businesses will have more customers in close proximity, and a variety of excellent transportation choices will be available to bring more people to and from other areas of the city. Our community facilities and parks will have more users, creating neighbourhood vibrancy that is the hallmark of a great city, no matter what its size.

City Hall can lead Saskatoon in this direction by prioritizing and staging development in strategic areas and importantly, by attaching the financial, regulatory, and procedural mechanisms to facilitate development. Curtailing outward development and prioritizing infill sites like downtown, U of S endowment lands, the intensification along major corridors like 22nd St, Idylwyld Dr, College Dr, Preston Ave, 8th St, and doing so in coordination with the implementation of a bus rapid transit system and active transportation infrastructure that adds capacity for moving more people along our streets in safe, comfortable, and dignified ways, alongside private vehicles is vitally important.

Financial tools will be a big part of directing growth inward. It is crucial that the 'price signal' be as clear as it can be in relation to our articulated planning goals for inward development. Examples of things to consider:

- varying levies charged to developers based on areas of city
- varying levies according to whether it is a redevelopment of an existing area of city, a new greenfield development at the city's edge, and significantly lowering or waiving charges, in whole or in part, when development advances the highest or most challenging sustainable growth priorities

- value capture mechanism(s) negotiated with developers that distributes a portion of the proceeds from uplifted property values back for public purposes at strategic redevelopment sites where public infrastructure investment (e.g., rapid transit station) or regulatory changes significantly contribute to intensified land use

2. Downtown

This is a facet of inward growth, but a key issue on its own as the shared civic heart for people across the city. It is vitally important that we attract significant new residential development downtown in order to create a downtown neighbourhood that supports businesses, promotes living and working downtown, and infuses the public realm with residents who see it as their neighbourhood. Most issues downtown can be solved when thousands of people live throughout it, making it their home. Analysis done in phase one of the City Centre Plan indicates that the number of people living in Saskatoon's city centre is the lowest per unit area – by a lot – among eight comparator cities across the prairies and rest of Canada. Curtailing new office development outside of downtown is also important. So is keeping existing and attracting new commercial and institutional tenants.

Can we re-direct the mandate of the City of Saskatoon's Land Branch to focus on our planning goals for inward development, corridor development, and downtown? The Land Branch has been much of the driving force behind designing and developing new neighbourhoods at the city's edge, but if the City wants to be proactive in the coming years with inward development, can the Land Branch be re-tooled to be effective downtown?

In Calgary, for example, the Calgary Municipal Land Corporation (CMLC) was created as a wholly owned subsidiary of the City in 2007 and has been working over the last decade to re-develop and intensify development in an under-capitalized area of the downtown (centred on the East Village neighbourhood) facilitating new private sector residential, retail, commercial, and institutional investment, renewed life to heritage properties through adaptive re-use, with significant public investment and development leadership from the CMLC in public space, transportation, infrastructure improvements, and currently working toward a new central branch of the public library. An important financial tool for the CMLC has been its ability to take advantage of the Community Revitalization Levy (based on tax increment financing) that the Province of Alberta enabled for urban areas in that province. It could be an opportunity for the Province of Saskatchewan and our city.

There are several new financial incentives that could be applied, but also some we are doing already that could be made more attractive and applied more aggressively. In the short-term, a downtown development task force might be useful for recommending regulatory, procedural, and financial mechanisms to accelerate investment downtown. The city's role in actively brokering downtown development in coming years will be important.

3. Re-investing in our existing neighbourhoods

Saskatoon is a city of great neighbourhoods. Enhancing existing neighbourhoods throughout the city can be a hallmark of our city's approach to urban development and relates to the first issue of inward growth. Saskatoon is known for its local area planning with community residents in a limited number of older neighbourhoods of the city, and also has the experience through the

Broadway 360° development planning process of bringing neighbourhood residents, businesses, developers, and city officials together to plan and implement local area improvements. Many of our Community Associations show time and again their appetite and ability to lead on neighbourhood improvement projects. Supporting existing neighbourhoods with resources and expertise from city hall while sharing authority for design and decision-making with the local communities can be a distinguishing feature of Saskatoon urbanism in coming years.

New civic engagement approaches in the future – coupled with open data – could enhance political and social trust. Some would rather participate digitally on their own timeframe than go to a scheduled open house put on by city hall. Some would prefer more active and tactile forms of in-person participation than the traditional open house offers, such as walking and talking around areas of the city that are the subject of new development proposals or infrastructure improvements. Citizens, local councillor, member(s) of city staff, walking and talking and brainstorming together, on site, jointly organized with community associations or other community-based organizations. Expanding the variety of ways community engagement is undertaken is important.

4. Indigenous urbanism

Saskatoon is on territory shared with sovereign First Nations and Métis peoples. But our partnerships for governance; social and cultural planning; land use and development; design and placemaking; environmental services, to name a few, are not very well developed. Indigenous peoples are more often treated as ‘stakeholders’ than as equal partners with political, administrative, and community authority situated right here in the city. Saskatoon has the opportunity to be the best place in the country at modelling what the actual practice of reconciliation looks like, creating good lives together that reflect multiple worldviews, processes, shared authority, needs, aspirations, and place-based histories. City hall could also examine and improve its own administrative, advisory, decision-making, and implementation processes using this critical lens.

5. Social planning

While the city does not have the range of resources, capacity or responsibility that the provincial and federal governments do for social redistribution, the city’s affordable housing program has been commendable and our community’s need for affordable housing, social housing, and connected support services will remain into the future. The city is well positioned to play a leadership role in smoothing out the seams in inter-governmental and inter-agency work and brokering partnerships to achieve social goals in Saskatoon. The city’s role in social planning will be very important into the future for building social equity, intercultural relations, and community cohesion.

There are other key issues that I have not had time to talk about today. One is the great importance of regional planning over the coming decades. A second is the vital role of the Meewasin Valley Authority as a regulatory authority and interpretive steward for our sustainable growth, planning, and enhancement of our most cherished natural heritage and public spaces. To close, Saskatoon can position itself well in the short-term to implement its own brand of urbanism that achieves sustainable growth over the next 20 years and beyond.